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[Home](#) > Creative Recovery and Cultural Resiliency

# Creative Recovery and Cultural Resiliency

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Caron Atlas

While I was volunteering at the Park Slope Armory evacuation shelter I asked for advice from a member of the clergy when I encountered a problem I couldn't solve. He told me to follow my instinct. I said I didn't trust my instinct; the situation was far beyond my experience. He responded, "This is your opportunity to stretch yourself." A lot of stretching has been going on in the aftermath of Hurricane Sandy. People, organizations, and communities have been coming together to meet a challenge and stretch in ways we had no idea were possible. In doing so we experienced the inequities exposed and exaggerated by the storm.

In *A Paradise Built in Hell: The Extraordinary Communities That Arise in Disaster* (2009), Rebecca Solnit describes the extraordinary communities that come together following disasters and that "give us... a glimpse of who else we ourselves may be and what else our society could become." <sup>1</sup> In this essay I describe how artists and cultural organizers have helped create extraordinary communities and respond to extraordinary inequities. It focuses on the ways cultural work that is rooted in community and social networks can advance a just and creative recovery and a truly resilient city. This is a stretch that goes far beyond disasters. Organized compassion, unified communities, and powerful stories last long beyond a storm.

## Organized Compassion at the Park Slope Armory

In the aftermath of Hurricane Sandy I was part of an extraordinary community. In my work with the Arts & Democracy Project I experienced the transformational power of arts and culture through the creativity, compassion, and meaningful engagement that took place in my neighborhood and across the city. Park Slope, Brooklyn, was spared most of the destruction of Hurricane Sandy. Two evacuation shelters were located in the community, including one at the Park Slope Armory to which were moved over 500 elderly and special needs evacuees from nursing and adult homes in the Rockaways hit hard by Sandy. Evacuated after the storm through waist-high floodwaters, they arrived in our neighborhood cold, wet, and in shock.

Three days after the evacuees arrived I was asked by City Councilmember Brad Lander to meet

with him and the shelter leadership about organizing some activities to engage the evacuees. Arts & Democracy, which I direct, had a history of working with Lander, most recently on participatory budgeting in our neighborhood. Having addressed the most pressing food and health challenges, the shelter leadership was now concerned about what to do with an armory full of people. Artists were offering their services, but organizing them was more than the shelter could take on. They said we could organize activities if we created and took responsibility for their infrastructure, including the volunteers, and if we included wellness and religious activities along with cultural ones.

We created a wellness center in a corner of the armory drill floor, with programs that included arts and culture, exercise, massage, religious services, a Veterans Day commemoration, an election-watching party, film screenings, therapy dogs, AA meetings, and stress relief. In essence, the wellness center became the living room of the armory — a place where the residents could come to talk, reflect, create, build community, and even enjoy themselves. It served the staff and volunteers as well.

The Arts & Democracy Project was able to draw on our strong relationships in the community and in the city, including our partners in the Naturally Occurring Cultural District Working Group, many of whom were also involved in relief efforts. As a small organization, we were flexible and resourceful and were accustomed to building teams. Each day new volunteers, many of them artists, joined our core organizing group, bringing with them an abundance of skills and community relationships.

Artists from the neighborhood, and across the city, stepped up. Big Apple Circus members performed from cot to cot, and musicians played for the meal lines. Actors from leading Broadway shows organized an evening of music, and the Belcea Quartet played when Carnegie Hall was closed down. Cajun cellist Sean Grisson was a favorite of residents and FEMA workers from Louisiana. Mary Ann McSweeney's jazz ensemble made repeated visits, which became call-and-response sessions with residents who had a deep love for jazz. Maria Bauman from Urban Bush Women helped elderly residents, through movement, address the pain and stiffness in their bodies from sleeping on cots.

We also discovered the creative talents of the residents. One resident, who had stopped playing the piano after his stroke, picked up a keyboard for our talent show, supported by wellness center musicians. Another resident painted throughout what came to be the three months of his evacuation at the armory and subsequent shelters. Regular storytelling and writing workshops and a nightly knitting circle provided opportunities for residents to process what was happening to them, and daily sing-alongs built community and raised spirits.

The wellness center also helped connect cultural and civic groups, schools, and networks with the armory shelter. We were the place, for example, that could receive the hundreds of letters schoolchildren wrote to the evacuees. A Veterans Day event organized with Councilmember Lander and the armory veterans' museum brought together evacuees and volunteers who felt acknowledged in a way they hadn't before. It became difficult for community members to volunteer at the shelter once professional AmeriCorps and Red Cross volunteers arrived, but the wellness center remained an outlet for neighborhood volunteers.

The involvement of community members at the shelter was important, both for the volunteers

and for the evacuees. Councilmember Lander described this as “the extraordinary power of organized compassion.” For shelter resident Miriam Eisenstein-Drachler, it was “courtesy, gentleness and goodness beyond description.” Her thank-you letter, published in the *New York Times*, concluded, “May the world outside these walls incorporate the outstanding dynamics of the Armory in its daily flow of human interaction. This, I believe, is the basic need of the present. May it be realized in society-at-large.” <sup>2</sup>

We were flooded with requests from artists. To build community and continuity, we gave priority to regular volunteers at the shelter and artists willing to come back more than once. We drew on our cultural networks, on groups like Hospital Audiences, on key individuals, such as Ted Wiprud from the New York Philharmonic, who provided us with a steady stream of musicians, and on musicians who came back regularly with ensembles of friends and colleagues. Artists said how rare it was to engage in such meaningful work, and several became members of our core organizing team.

Ilyana Kadushin described her armory experience on Sandy Storyline, a participatory documentary that has grown out of the storm: “After we performed this song called ‘Joy of Life,’ one of the women in the group, Latisha, who was blind and had been living in this shelter for almost two weeks, stood up and said that our song made her want to give a speech to everyone listening. ‘We have all been through a lot these past weeks, it’s been hard, but we have to find the joy, find the joy in every day.’ This moment will go down as one of my favorites as a musician and as a human.” <sup>3</sup>

I was involved in numerous negotiations, ranging from knitting needles to music volume to therapy dogs. By the end we had the full support of the leadership, who saw our work as an essential part of the shelter. They realized that our artists were the ones who knew the residents best, and they came to rely on us to communicate with them. One of the doctors credited our work with avoiding a riot in the shelter. For me, above all, our work helped return people’s dignity and respect. They went from being evacuees in rows of cots to being human beings.

The four things that made the wellness center successful could easily be replicated elsewhere:

- We had an invitation to come in from an elected official and the shelter leadership.
- We knew how to organize the infrastructure and programs, and were willing to take responsibility for them.
- We accessed preexisting cultural and social networks and resources.
- Local volunteers and nonprofits were welcome to work alongside city, state, and federal workers with a common goal of creating a humane shelter.

The Arts & Democracy Project recommends that wellness centers be included as an intentional part of shelter design and ongoing recovery and rebuilding efforts in New York City. They should be set up on day one and have standing in shelter operations. We know how to provide the infrastructure to make this possible, and many arts organizations have the capacity to organize them. We are documenting the Park Slope Armory experience so that it can help inform disaster planning. We are also exploring the idea of creating an Arts & Wellness Recovery Corps that can continue the work, help artists get emergency training, and become further integrated into citywide efforts.

After the armory shelter closed our stretch increased. One of the groups from an adult home was unable to return home, and we followed them for two months to even more challenging shelters, including a psychiatric residence. By continuing our cultural programming we stayed connected with them, and were able to share their stories and advocate on their behalf.

## Rebirth in Red Hook

Dance Theatre Etcetera (DTE) has a long history in Red Hook, a community hard hit by Sandy. Led by Martha Bowers, they have worked in all the neighborhood schools and organize the annual Red Hook Fest in collaboration with diverse community partners. DTE's second-floor office escaped damage from the storm, so they provided space for community organizations, Occupy Sandy, and political leaders; functioned as an information hub; and joined cleanup efforts in the neighborhood. When DTE learned that the Brooklyn Community Foundation was seeking collaborative proposals from neighborhoods affected by the storm with a very short window of opportunity, it reached out to its robust network and helped coordinate a successful proposal for the Red Hook Coalition, including Added Value, Red Hook Initiative, and Good Shepherd Services. The \$100,000 raised supported the small businesses that are an essential part of the community fabric and that were about to go under as a result of storm damage and lost business, as well as supported ongoing resiliency planning. Additionally, DTE applied directly to the Brooklyn Community Foundation and received a \$10,000 Sandy Relief grant that was used to pay two lead members of the Red Hook Volunteers (an outgrowth of Occupy Sandy efforts) who had quit their jobs to do relief work. They were able to continue spearheading data collection on affected households and coordinate thousands of volunteers.

DTE is now working with its partners to thoughtfully and proactively address the race, class, and equity issues that can challenge a community where public housing residents, small businesses, and newcomer artists and activists have not always worked together. They are helping to organize a community summit designed by a group of representatives nominated by the community groups. Coalition building is difficult and time-consuming work that is central to DTE's mission as a community-based organization and good neighbor. It has also directed some of its own resources to support Red Hook artists affected by the storm and compensate them for their work on behalf of the community. This includes media and spoken word artist Tyquan "Happy" Carter, who was hired to document post-Sandy Red Hook from inside the community. DTE was hardest hit by the loss of contracts from schools in the waterfront communities that were flooded. They received a critical grant from the Fund for the City of New York to make up for this lost income, which will help support a summer media project aimed at decreasing the digital divide.

This year's Red Hook Fest "Rebuild, Restore, Rebirth: Resilience after Sandy" will be a meaningful part of neighborhood recovery. Taking place May 30–June 1, the festival will be kicked off by youth, include a community BBQ and dance party, and offer performances by neighborhood and visiting artists, including a special dance tribute to Sandy survivors featuring dancers from the Candomblé, Korean shamanic, and Hawaiian ceremonial hula traditions, in collaboration with the Brooklyn Arts Council. Recognizing the importance of special events in the community to bring people together and raise their spirits, DTE is reviving their parade, which will march through hard-hit parts of the community and celebrate their rebirth. "Individuals, organizations, businesses, faith-based groups and/or schools can participate. Decorate your strollers, come on bikes, make your business vehicle into a float, paste spring flowers on your old

hazmat suit or march with your organization! There are loads of creative people in Red Hook — let's take our strengths and talents to the street.”

Like much of DTE's work, the parade will unify the neighborhood. It will also exemplify what anthropologist Alaka Wali describes as “the aesthetics of resilience,” in which resilience is “the capacity to strategize, make effective use of support networks, and innovate new forms of social relationships” and also incorporates the aesthetics that “underlie the ‘design’ of social relationships.”

## Telling the Stories

We have studied social movements that arise in the wake of disaster — from Argentina to Sri Lanka to New Orleans, and one of the key lessons we've learned is that a vital part of the healing process is to be part of a community that has some agency — some say — in the process of rebuilding. Sandy Storyline recognizes and develops this critical community power to shape the narrative. That may be the most revolutionary project of all.

— Avi Lewis, documentary film director

Given the magnitude of the storm, longtime housing activists and storytellers Rachel Falcone, Michael Premo, and Laura Gottesdiener realized that they couldn't tell the many stories of the storm alone, so they started Sandy Storyline with dozens of other artists, educators, journalists, and designers. This ongoing project takes the form of a “participatory documentary” in which hundreds of community-generated storylines can live and interact. People can shape their own narratives about the storm and visions for rebuilding, “so communities can decide, from the ground up, their own futures.” They use storytelling to “highlight the voices and faces of people affected by the storm, bringing the human impact into the national conversation about economic inequality, climate change, infrastructure development and the future of coastal cities in America.”

Sandy Storyline features audio, video, photography, and written stories — contributed by residents and citizen journalists — that are shared through an immersive web documentary and interactive exhibitions. People can share their stories by email, by photography, by telephone, or by in-person interviews. So far the project has collected more than 250 stories, organized media education for more than 100 people, and hosted multiple community exhibitions with much more to come. Participants have a range of involvement from contributing a story to participating in educational programs to building leadership in their community. Recognized “as a model for narratives surrounding future moments of crisis,” Sandy Storyline won the first ever Transmedia Award from the 2013 Tribeca Film Festival.

Storyline builds on its creators' experience in the relief and recovery work immediately following the hurricane. “As we volunteered to help distribute goods, set up kitchens, and assess the community needs, we realized that the impacts of the storm were vast and devastating. From our activism and documentation work on Hurricane Katrina and the ensuing housing crisis, we knew that the Sandy disaster would provide an opportunity for the city to be reshaped — physically, economically and politically.” They are partnering with existing and new organizations and networks, including Occupy Sandy, which Premo helped found, and the Arts & Democracy Project to document the experiences of adult home residents from the Rockaways.

Arts educator Maxine Greene describes the concept of “a vision that sees big,” by viewing people in their “integrity and particularity... in close contact with details that cannot be reduced to statistics or even to the measurable.” Sandy Storyline “sees big” through the wisdom and nuance of stories, which individually go deep and in aggregate provide a powerful multivocal narrative of the storm and rebuilding.

## Sustaining the Work

Finish what you start and don't just move on.

— MK Wegmann, National Performance Network

At the six-month anniversary of the hurricane, the Arts & Democracy Project hosted a conference call to provide an opportunity for those involved in creative recovery in New York to describe their work and ask for advice from each other and colleagues in New Orleans who had responded to Katrina. <sup>4</sup> The focus of the call was on sustaining and transforming the work as it moved through its phases of relief, recovery, rebuilding, and resilience. The questions we discussed included the following:

- How can we keep activated artists who volunteered in relief efforts involved in this work over time? What ongoing infrastructure can facilitate their involvement?
- How can we keep the importance of neighborhood networks and cultural resilience on the agendas of recovery meetings?
- How can we best use our cultural expertise to build unity in communities?
- How can artists help communities in the process of redefining themselves?
- When does a local organization lead and when does it respond by knowing what the community wants?
- What should we be doing now during the six-month mark, and what should we be doing in the future?
- How can we use our work to build awareness of the hundreds of people who are still displaced? (The call occurred the day before the city was going to stop subsidizing hotels for Sandy evacuees.)
- How can we strategically connect disparate efforts?
- How can storytelling play a role in leadership development so people can advocate on their own behalf?
- How can we get financial support for this work?

New Orleans participants shared their wisdom about time frames, partnerships, insider/outside dynamics, intermediary structures, resources, healing, and shifting policy. Above all they emphasized that this was ongoing work over the long haul. More than seven years after Katrina they are still very much at work. Carol Bebelle of the Ashé Cultural Center reminded the group of the importance of slowing down to sustain the work. “It’s OK to catch your breath, to focus on anything besides getting your act together.” Each context is different and the work is situational. It is helpful, however, to share information and collaborate, as in the case of Sandy Storyline and Land of Opportunity, who are working together on a media project to see if lessons learned from Katrina might, or might not, be applied to Sandy.

While call participants agreed that there is no formula for this work, they recognized that there

are principles and ethics that can be shared, including mutually beneficial and equitable partnerships and processes that ensure accountability. In the case of Transforma, a project initiated by outside artists, principles included coming to listen, paying respect to and working alongside local artists, being transparent, documenting the work, and adding, rather than extracting, resources. The Ashé Cultural Center did whatever people needed them to do. This included being a convener, where “you can check in and connect to resources.” They helped identify who was doing what so everyone wasn’t doing it, supported their community with the healing power of culture and ritual, and invited funders to come to New Orleans to learn about local initiatives.

Arts funders were able to get disaster relief resources to affected artists quickly in both cities. Support for arts and culture as part of recovery efforts comes more slowly. It is still minimal in New York and came after a year in New Orleans. The National Performance Network helped support this process by functioning as a respected intermediary that could direct national funding to local efforts. Now that government funds are becoming available through Community Development Block Grants, we talked about how cultural groups could access these funds and considered how foundations could use their convening power to connect stakeholder groups working on recovery and resilience with one another and with opportunities for resources.

## Stretching toward a Greater Whole

Just days after the September 11 terror attacks, I had the good fortune to hear Wangari Maathai speak about how the Green Belt Movement mobilized Kenyan women to plant trees and take their destiny into their own hands. Her story of hope and courage made a profound impact on the New York audience at a time when it was hard to get through the day. It was a story of stretching past one’s fear to create an extraordinary community, and it helped us embrace the future.

Hurricane Sandy both devastated and stretched us. It displaced residents and unified communities, exposed inequities, and offered us the opportunity to become part of a greater whole. What lies ahead? A new vision of resilience based on creative connections, or a return to business as usual? It’s a good question for our cultural community and for our city in this year of leadership transition.

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## NOTES

This essay identifies some of the ways in which artists and cultural organizations are participating in recovery. There are many other good examples as well, including the Shore Soup Project, a pay-as-you-can relief restaurant being created by Rockaway artists and other residents as part of the Rockaway Rescue Alliance; community programs offered by the Queens Museum of Art; and *Cooked*, a Kartemquin film that illustrates the importance of social networks in Chicago during the 1995 heat wave and in post-Sandy New York.

1. Rebecca Solnit, *A Paradise Built in Hell: The Extraordinary Communities That Arise in*

- Disaster* (New York: Viking, 2009), 9.
2. An Evacuee's Letter from the Park Slope Armory, *New York Times*, November 16, 2012; <http://cityroom.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/11/16/an-evacuees-letter-from-the-park-slope-armory> [2].
  3. Joy of Life, <http://www.sandystoryline.com/explore> [3].
  4. Call participants included Caron Atlas, Arts & Democracy Project and NOCD-NY; Martha Bowers, Dance Theater Etcetera; Melanie Cohn, Staten Island Arts and NOCD-NY; Rachel Falcone, Sandy Storyline; Michael Premo, Sandy Storyline and Occupy Sandy; Maria Bauman, Urban Bush Women; Carol Bebel, Ashé Cultural Center; Luisa Dantas and Laine Kaplan-Levenson, Land of Opportunity; Jessica Garz, formerly Transforma, currently Surdna Foundation; Stephanie McKee, Junebug Productions; MK Wegmann, National Performance Network; and Kathie deNobriga, Michelle Proffit, and Javiera Benavente, the Arts & Democracy Project.

Categories: [Caron Atlas](#) [4] [GIA Reader \(2000-present\)](#) [5] [Art and Social Justice](#) [6] [Special Section](#) [7] [Community Development](#) [8] [Disaster Response](#) [9]

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**Links:**

- [1] <http://www.giarts.org/reader-24-2>
- [2] <http://cityroom.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/11/16/an-evacuees-letter-from-the-park-slope-armory>
- [3] <http://www.sandystoryline.com/explore>
- [4] <http://www.giarts.org/category/authors/caron-atlas>
- [5] <http://www.giarts.org/taxonomy/term/59>
- [6] <http://www.giarts.org/category/arts-funding/art-and-social-justice>
- [7] <http://www.giarts.org/category/table-contents/special-section>
- [8] <http://www.giarts.org/category/arts-funding/community-development>
- [9] <http://www.giarts.org/category/arts-funding/disaster-response>